

Mount Silcox Wildlife Management Area Grazing Project Public Draft EA

March 2010



***Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks***

Mount Silcox WMA Grazing Project
Public Draft Environmental Assessment
MEPA, NEPA, MCA 23-1-110 CHECKLIST

PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

1. Type of proposed state action:

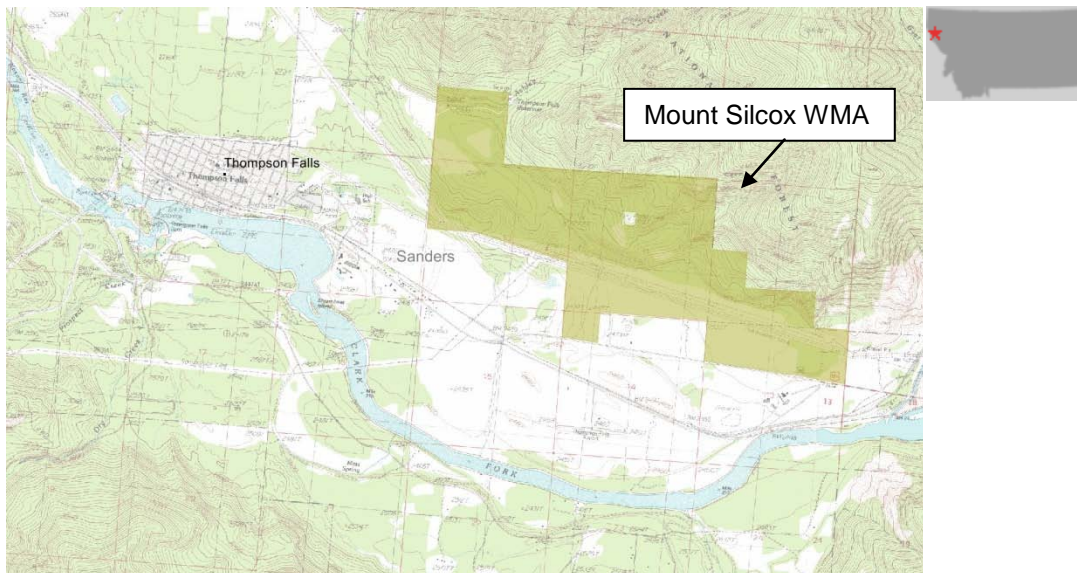
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to establish a new grazing lease on the Mount Silcox Wildlife Management Area (WMA) with the Knerr Ranch for a 6-year term to begin May 2010 (with subsequent grazing starting on April 15 of each year) through October 2015 in order to improve the quality of vegetation for wintering deer, elk, and big horn sheep.

2. Agency authority for the proposed action:

FWP has the authority under Section 87-1-210, M.C.A. to protect, enhance, and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future. Additionally, the Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission must approve any grazing leases on Wildlife Management Areas owned by FWP.

3. Location affected by proposed action:

Sanders County, R29W, T21N



4. **Project size - estimate the number of acres that would be directly affected that are currently:**

	<u>Acres</u>		<u>Acres</u>
(a) Developed:		(d) Floodplain	<u>0</u>
Residential	<u>0</u>		
Industrial	<u>0</u>	(e) Productive:	
(existing shop area)		Irrigated cropland	<u>0</u>
(b) Open Space/	<u>0</u>	Dry cropland	<u>0</u>
Woodlands/Recreation		Forestry	<u>0</u>
(c) Wetlands/Riparian	<u>0</u>	Rangeland	<u>500</u>
Areas		Other	<u>0</u>

5. **Listing of any other local, state, or federal agency that has overlapping or additional jurisdiction:**

(a) **Permits (Permits will be filed at least 2 weeks prior to project start.):**

None

(b) **Funding:**

MFWP will charge a grazing fee of \$18 per AUM.

(c) **Other overlapping or additional jurisdictional responsibilities:**

None

6. **Narrative summary of the proposed action or project, including the benefits and purpose of the proposed action:**

The proposed action will allow cattle to graze on the Mt. Silcox Wildlife Management Area (WMA) as part of a three-pasture rest-rotation grazing management plan (See Appendix A for the Management Plan). The three-pasture rest-rotation grazing system will consist of two pastures, approximately 250 acres each, located on the WMA, which is owned and managed by FWP. The third pasture will consist of approximately 90 acres of land the operator leases from a third party, Mr. Vulles.

The duration of the plan will be for six years (two complete grazing cycles). Benefits include an increase in the quality of grass produced on the WMA. The species composition of grass on the west pasture is predominately composed of several varieties of Poa (Poa spp.). The primary grass on the east WMA pasture is an introduced species - smooth brome (*Bromus inermis*). Additional grass species found on the WMA in lesser quantities are Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*), bluebunch wheat grass (*Agropyron spicatum*), and Timothy (*Phleum spp.*). Wintering deer, elk, and bighorn sheep will benefit from the improved quality of vegetation and stimulation of fall regrowth during the critical winter and spring seasons.

The pastures on the WMA were grazed from 1995 through 2003 and again in 2007 and 2008 during the summer and fall grazing seasons. Stocking rates between 40-50 pairs

were used. The management area has been rested the past year. As part of the grazing agreement, the Knerrrs are willing to maintain the WMA fences and gates prior to turning livestock onto the pastures each year.

The Knerrrs would provide up to 50 cow-calf pairs and 2 bulls. Cattle will graze grass produced during the growing season and be allowed to graze the WMA after seed ripe on a rotational basis. Cattle will be rotated between three pastures, two on the WMA and one on the third party's land.

A long-term problem with managing livestock on the WMA has been a source of water. The option of developing a well and water tanks was explored, but the cost was determined to be prohibitive. During the 2007/08 grazing period, Mr. Vulles, whose land borders the WMA, supplied water for cattle from his own water source. Mr. Vulles is willing to provide water from his well for livestock while they graze the WMA.

During the summer months of April through September, the predominate big game species found on the WMA is white-tailed deer. Elk and bighorn sheep use the WMA primarily during the fall, winter, and spring seasons. Occasional sightings of black bears and mountain lions can also occur on the WMA.

The Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the leasee will revalue this grazing lease after the six-year cycle is complete. Automatic renewal of this grazing lease is not guaranteed.

7. Description of Alternatives:

Alternative A: No Action

Grazing would not take place and no benefits would be observed to remove decadent vegetation and to stimulate fall regrowth of vegetation for wintering wildlife.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

Allow grazing of cattle on the WMA pastures for the duration of the grazing plan (six years) to aid in vegetation management, to remove residual vegetation, and to stimulate fall regrowth of grass to benefit wintering wildlife.

PART II. PREDICTED ENVIRONMENTAL OUTCOMES

A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. <u>LAND RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Soil instability or changes in geologic substructure?		X				
b. Disruption, displacement, erosion, compaction, moisture loss, or over-covering of soil, which would reduce productivity or fertility?			X			1b
c. Destruction, covering, or modification of any unique geologic or physical features?		X				
d. Changes in siltation, deposition, or erosion patterns that may modify the channel of a river or stream or the bed or shore of a lake?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to earthquakes, landslides, ground failure, or other natural hazard?		X				
f. Other:						

1b. The small amount of cattle, 40-50 pairs, and the short grazing period, 3 months per pasture, will not cause any measurable damage to soils except possibly where cattle concentrate to travel and locate water. The water source is located off, but adjacent to, the wildlife management area on a third party's private parcel. This third party has agreed to provide water, form a well, for the duration of the grazing agreement.

2. <u>AIR</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (Also see 13c.)		X				
b. Creation of objectionable odors?		X				
c. Alteration of air movement, moisture, or temperature patterns or any change in climate, either locally or regionally?		X				
d. Adverse effects on vegetation, including crops, due to increased emissions of pollutants?		X				
e. For P-R/D-J projects, will the project result in any discharge, which will conflict with federal or state air quality regs? (Also see 2a.)		X				
f. Other:						

The proposed project will not change ambient air quality within the WMA.

3. WATER Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Discharge into surface water or any alteration of surface water quality, including but not limited to temperature, dissolved oxygen, or turbidity?		X				
b. Changes in drainage patterns or the rate and amount of surface runoff?		X				
c. Alteration of the course or magnitude of floodwater or other flows?		X				
d. Changes in the amount of surface water in any water body or creation of a new water body?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to water-related hazards such as flooding?		X				
f. Changes in the quality of groundwater?		X				
g. Changes in the quantity of groundwater?		X				
h. Increase in risk of contamination of surface or groundwater?		X				3h
i. Effects on any existing water right or reservation?		X				
j. Effects on other water users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quality?		X				
k. Effects on other users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quantity?		X				
l. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect a designated floodplain? (Also see 3c.)		X				
m. For P-R/D-J, will the project result in any discharge that will affect federal or state water quality regulations? (Also see 3a.)		X				
n. Other:						

3h. There is no surface water present on the pastures designated for grazing. Cattle will be watered from a source adjacent to the wildlife management area located on a third party's private parcel. The source of this water is from a well.

4. VEGETATION Will the proposed action result in?	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity, or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?			X			4a
b. Alteration of a plant community?		X				
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				4c
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?		X				
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?		X				4e
f. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect wetlands or prime and unique farmland?		X				
g. Other:						

4a. The grazing design should increase productivity and abundance of most grass species located on the WMA. Some loss in grass biomass may occur.

4c. No threatened or endangered species are located within the boundaries of the pastures.

4e. The grazing system should reduce the spread of noxious weeds by increasing the productivity of several grass species. The increased productivity should reduce the amount of bare ground needed for noxious weeds to propagate. FWP will continue to implement methods for weed control as described in the 2008 Integrated Weed Management Plan.

5. <u>FISH/WILDLIFE</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?		X				5a
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?			X			5b
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?		X				
d. Introduction of new species into an area?		X				
e. Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals?		X				
f. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				5f
g. Increase in conditions that stress wildlife populations or limit abundance (including harassment, legal or illegal harvest, or other human activity)?		X				
h. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will the project be performed in any area in which T&E species are present, and will the project affect any T&E species or their habitat? (Also see 5f.)		X				
i. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location? (Also see 5d.)		X				
j. Other:						

5a. The grazing system should improve the quality of habitat for wintering wildlife.

5b. Production of fall regrowth may cause an increase in the number of deer, elk, and bighorn sheep on some portions of the WMA during the winter and spring seasons.

5f. No threatened or endangered species are found on the grazed portion of the WMA. The Silcox wolf pack does occupy the WMA on a frequent basis.

B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. <u>NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Increases in existing noise levels?		X				
b. Exposure of people to severe or nuisance noise levels?		X				
c. Creation of electrostatic or electromagnetic effects that could be detrimental to human health or property?		X				
d. Interference with radio or television reception and operation?		X				
e. Other:						

The proposed project will not change existing noise levels within the WMA.

7. <u>LAND USE</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use of an area?			X			7a
b. Conflict with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		X				
c. Conflict with any existing land use whose presence would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?		X				
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?		X				
e. Other:						

The proposed project will not alter the current land use within the WMA.

7a. A grazing fee of \$18 per AUM will be charged by FWP.

8. <u>RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Risk of an explosion or release of hazardous substances (including but not limited to oil, pesticides, chemicals, or radiation) in the event of an accident or other forms of disruption?		X				
b. Affect an existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan, or create a need for a new plan?		X				
c. Creation of any human health hazard or potential hazard?		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will any chemical toxicants be used? (Also see 8a.)		X				
e. Other:						

The proposed project will not increase the public to risks or health hazards within the WMA.

9. <u>COMMUNITY IMPACT</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the human population of an area?		X				
b. Alteration of the social structure of a community?		X				
c. Alteration of the level or distribution of employment or community or personal income?		X				
d. Changes in industrial or commercial activity?		X				
e. Increased traffic hazards or effects on existing transportation facilities or patterns of movement of people and goods?		X				
f. Other:						

The proposed project will not alter the activities of local ranches or communities near the WMA.

10. <u>PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. An effect upon or result in a need for new or altered governmental services in any of the following areas: fire or police protection, schools, parks/recreational facilities, roads or other public maintenance, water supply, sewer or septic systems, solid waste disposal, health, or other governmental services? If any, specify:		X				
b. An effect upon the local or state tax base and revenues?			X			10b
c. A need for new facilities or substantial alterations of any of the following utilities: electric power, natural gas, other fuel supply or distribution systems, or communications?		X				
d. An increased use of any energy source?		X				
e. Define projected revenue sources			X			10b
f. Define projected maintenance costs.			X			10f
g. Other:						

10b. A grazing fee of \$18 will be charged per AUM and collected by MFWP.

10f. Currently, gates and fences are in good working condition. In the future some fence repair will be needed, but the lessee will provide all the labor for the project. MFWP will provide all fencing materials.

11. <u>AESTHETICS/RECREATION</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of any scenic vista or creation of an aesthetically offensive site or effect that is open to public view?		X				11a
b. Alteration of the aesthetic character of a community or neighborhood?		X				11a
c. Alteration of the quality or quantity of recreational/tourism opportunities and settings? (Attach Tourism Report.)		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails, or wilderness areas be impacted? (Also see 11a, 11c.)		X				
e. Other:						

11a. The WMA is located in a remote, rural setting. All cattle will be removed prior to the rifle-hunting season, which starts the last week of October. Cattle are to be removed no later than October 15 of each year.

12. <u>CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Destruction or alteration of any site, structure, or object of prehistoric, historic, or paleontological importance?		X				
b. Physical change that would affect unique cultural values?		X				
c. Effects on existing religious or sacred uses of a site or area?		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect historic or cultural resources? Attach SHPO letter of clearance. (Also see 12a.)		X				
e. Other:						

The proposed project is not expected to impact any cultural/historic resource within the WMA.

13. <u>SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE</u> Will the proposed action, considered as a whole:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? (A project or program may result in impacts on two or more separate resources that create a significant effect when considered together or in total.)		X				
b. Involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely hazardous if they were to occur?		X				
c. Potentially conflict with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard, or formal plan?		X				
d. Establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts will be proposed?		X				
e. Generate substantial debate or controversy about the nature of the impacts that would be created?		X				
f. For P-R/D-J, is the project expected to have organized opposition or generate substantial public controversy? (Also see 13e.)		X				
g. For P-R/D-J, list any federal or state permits required.		X				

The proposed project is not expected to generate any public controversy.

2. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:

None

PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT

The proposed action will allow cattle to graze on the Wildlife Management Area. A local rancher will provide the 40-50 pairs of cattle. Cattle will graze grass produced during the growing season and be allowed to graze the WMA after seed ripe on a rotational basis. Cattle will be rotated between three pastures, two on the WMA and one on the operator's land (see the attached grazing plan). The duration of the plan will be for six years (two complete grazing cycles). Benefits include an increase in the quality of grass produced on the WMA. The primary grass on the WMA is an introduced species - smooth brome (*Bromus inermis*). Wintering deer, elk, and bighorn sheep will benefit from the improved quality of vegetation and stimulation of fall regrowth during the critical winter and spring seasons.

PART IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1. Public Involvement:

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this draft EA, the proposed action, and the alternatives:

- Two public notices in the Sanders County Ledger.
- One statewide press release.
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web site: <http://fwp.mt.gov>.

Copies of this environmental assessment will be distributed to the neighboring landowners and interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project.

This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope, having limited impacts, many of which can be mitigated.

2. Duration of comment period:

The public comment period will extend for two weeks, from March 15 through March 29, 2010. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., March 29, 2010, and can be mailed to the address below:

Bruce Sterling, MFWP Area Wildlife Biologist
P.O. Box 35, Thompson Falls, MT 59873
bsterling@mt.gov

PART V. EA PREPARATION

- 1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? (YES/NO)?** No

If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action:

No significant impacts are anticipated.

- 2. Person responsible for preparing the EA:**

Bruce Sterling
MFWP Wildlife Biologist
P.O. Box 35
Thompson Falls, MT 59873
406-827-4389

- 3. List of agencies consulted during preparation of the EA:**

None

APPENDIX

A. Mount Silcox WMA Grazing Plan and Map

Appendix A

MOUNT SILCOX GRAZING MANAGEMENT PLAN

The three-pasture rest-rotation grazing system will consist of two pastures, approximately 250 acres each, located on the Mount Silcox Wildlife Management Area (MSWMA), which is owned and managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP). The third pasture will consist of approximately 90 acres of land the operator leases from a third party and is located east of Thompson Falls and adjacent to the Clark Fork River in Sanders County, Montana.

The pastures on Mount Silcox WMA were grazed from 1995 through 2003 and again in 2007 and 2008 during the summer and fall grazing seasons. Stocking rates of about 50 pairs were used. The management area has been rested the past year. All internal and perimeter fences and gates are currently in good condition. As part of the grazing agreement, Archie and John Knerr are willing to maintain the WMA fences and gates prior to turning livestock onto the pastures each year.

A long-term problem with managing livestock on the WMA has been a source of water. The option of developing a well and water tanks was explored, but the cost was determined to be prohibitive. During the 2007/08 grazing period Mickey Vulles, whose land borders the WMA, supplied water for cattle from his own water source. Mr. Vulles is willing to provide water from his well for livestock while they graze the WMA.

The grazing period will be for 6 years, which is equivalent to 2 complete grazing cycles. Table 1 describes the grazing rotation, pastures, and grazing period for the complete 6-year grazing schedule.

Table 1. Grazing rotation schedule for the Mount Silcox WMA - Mickey Vulles cooperative grazing system (see map).

Year	WMA South (Pasture 1)	WMA North (Pasture 2)	Vulles (Pasture 3)
2010	C ¹	A	B
2011	A	B	C
2012	B	C	A
2013	C	A	B
2014	A	B	C
2015	B	C	A

¹C= rest from livestock grazing for entire year. A= livestock grazing from mid-April to mid-July (seed ripe). B= livestock grazing from mid-July to October 15.

The stocking rate would be a maximum of 50 cow-calf pairs and two bulls. This would amount to 612 AUMs of grazing annually. The AUMs provided on the WMA will vary annually depending on the grazing rotation described in Table 1.

